

teorema

Vol. XXXVII/2, 2018, pp. 111-126

ISSN 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2018) 37:2; pp. 111-126

On Peels on Doxastic Responsibility

Christopher B. Kulp

RESUMEN

La teoría de la creencia responsable de Rik Peels se formula sobre el punto de vista de que no tenemos una elección intencional directa sobre la creencia de que p , por tanto, que es falso lo que William P. Alston llama la “tesis del control básico”. Este artículo desafía el punto de vista de Peels/Alston sobre la elección doxástica: hay casos en los que un voluntarismo doxástico modesto es creíble. El artículo argumenta a continuación que el proyecto de Peels saldría reforzado si expandiera su análisis de modo que incluyera los principios de responsabilidad doxástica en tanto que aplicados no solo a (i) elecciones que puedan influenciar la creencia de que p , como él hace efectivamente, sino también a (ii) elegir directamente el creer que p . El artículo se cierra con la sugerencia de un puñado de principios para la formación de creencias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *formación de creencias, voluntarismo doxástico, creencia responsable.*

ABSTRACT

Rik Peels’ theory of responsible belief is couched on the view that we do not have direct intentional choice over belief that p — therefore, that what William P. Alston calls the “basic control thesis” is false. This paper challenges the Alston/Peels view on doxastic choice: there are cases where a modest doxastic voluntarism seems credible. The paper then argues that Peels’ project would be strengthened were he to expand his analysis to include principles of doxastic responsibility as applied not only to (i) choices that may influence belief that p , as he does currently, but also to (ii) directly choosing to believe that p . The paper closes with a few suggested principles of belief formation.

KEYWORDS: *Belief Formation, Doxastic Voluntarism, Propositional Belief, Responsible Belief.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rik Peels' recent book, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*, is a notable achievement. Meticulously reasoned, fair-minded, and thoroughly abreast of the current scholarship, it is the most comprehensive and focused book-length discussion of doxastic responsibility known to me — and I conjecture that it shall have no peer for a considerable time to come. Not that Prof. Peels has mined all that the subject has to offer, much less resolved all of the current points of dispute — practical impossibilities, both — but he has doubtless moved the ball forward in a cogent and forceful way that will be difficult to surpass. But even though I obviously do not come to bury Peels, neither do I come only to praise him. Rather, I want to raise some rather broad concerns with Peels' project, with an eye to stimulating discussion which I hope may serve to expand and deepen his admirable project.

II. ON DOXASTIC VOLUNTARISM

In ch. 1, Peels argues that “to be responsible for believing [the proposition] that p is to be the proper object of one or more normative attitudes like praise, blame, and neutral appraisal for believing that p ” [Peels (2017), p. 51; my insertion], where belief is occurrent, dormant, or tacit. And in ch. 2 *passim*, he goes on to discuss the problem, posed by William P. Alston [Alston (1989), pp. 115-52], of whether an account of doxastic responsibility is in principle compatible with doxastic involuntarism, i.e., compatible with the thesis that we lack direct intentional control over belief. Peels agrees with Alston that we have no such control, and further argues [Peels (2017), esp. §2.4-§2.6] that (i) the absence of intentional control entails that one cannot be *directly* responsible for believing that p ; and (ii) that any responsibility for belief derives from the possibility of being able to influence the likelihood of one's believing that p at some future time [Peels (2017, ch. 3 *passim*).

I concur with Peels' rejection of compatibilist resolutions of the involuntarist/responsibilist problem, and I agree with him that if evaluable doxastic responsibility is to be retained, the efficacy of some form of doxastic choice must be defended. But by the same token, I agree with Gunnar Björnsson, who notes in his review of *Responsible Belief*, that the examples Peels adduces to demonstrate involuntarism do not convincingly show that “it is never up to us what to believe” [Björnsson (2017)].

But rather than address the inadequacy of Peels' examples directly, I propose to look at a range of cases to see if there is reason to doubt the involuntarist thesis.

Let me first note, however, that Peels aims his discussion at propositional belief, and does not directly engage with other forms of belief, such as *objectual belief* — roughly, belief that does not rise to the level of conceptualization requisite to entertain a proposition. For example, one may have the objectual belief of a round object's being incompatible with its being square, although the belief is not conceptually sophisticated enough to specify what the object is, much less precisely what roundness and squareness are, or why they are incompatible.¹ It would be interesting to see how Peels' theories would apply to other such forms of belief.

But as regards propositional belief, as remarked above, Peels throws in with Alston in holding that we do not have (direct) intentional doxastic control. As Alston tells us:

Those who have attacked this view [viz., the basic control thesis, which is “the thesis that one can take up at will whatever propositional attitude one chooses”] are divided between those who hold that believing at will is logically impossible and those who hold that it is only psychologically impossible...I cannot see any sufficient reason for the stronger claim, and so I shall merrily contend that we are not so constituted as to be able to take up propositional attitudes at will. My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers [Alston (1989), p. 122; my insertion, and quoting from *ibid*].²

Alston then goes on to provide several examples which he thinks show that we in fact do not have such powers. I propose to accept the psychological interpretation of the basic control thesis, and to see if we have reason to doubt it. To do so, I shall take a cue from Peels' apt rendering of J. L. Austin's remark to the effect that although “ordinary language is not the *last* word for philosophers, it is nonetheless the *first* word” [Peels (2017), p. 5, his emphasis]. So, let us ask, what does ordinary discourse suggest about choosing to believe that *p*? For the sake of simplicity and economy of space, I shall limit my remarks throughout this paper strictly to occurrent belief. Consider then, the following ordinary language propositions:

P1: Two plus two equals four.

P2: All bachelors are unmarried males.

P3: This is my hand in front of my face as I write this.

P4: A few minutes before writing this, my hand was in front of my face.

Nothing fancy here: nothing that ordinary discourse would find odd or challenging. And I confess that I am quite incapable of other than believing these propositions to be true. I find P1 and P2 self-evident, and arguably analytically true (I shall not press this). I also find P3 and P4, although both synthetic and clearly contingent, to be obviously true. I seem to have no choice in believing any of P1-P4; in each case I am simply presented with the belief that it is true.

Clearly, these examples — examples of the sort favored by Alston and Peels — militate strongly against doxastic voluntarism. And there are examples of a somewhat different sort that appear to further support the Alston/Peels line. For example:

P5: 743 is a prime number.

P6: The heaviest living human being weighs less than 1,250 lbs.

In both cases, I find myself unable to choose to believe in either their truth or in their falsity (although they are doubtless either true or false). Given an electronic calculator, I'm sure that my propositional attitude toward P5 would soon change,³ as it would regarding P6 after a few minutes on the Internet. But as for now, I find myself compelled to simply suspend belief.

But now let's consider another type of example, and see if it presses us in a different direction. Imagine a mountain climber, Jones, entertaining the following proposition:

P7: I (Jones) shall survive this dire mountain climbing emergency.

Let's put aside any technical reasons we may have for doubting whether propositions like P7 have a determinate truth value, and simply stipulate that they do: we shall take P7 to be either true or false. Although perhaps exotic in some readers' eyes, P7 may, I think, usefully induce us to question the Alston/Peels perspective on the basic control thesis.

Imagine that Jones is an accomplished mountain climber, and that he has been seriously injured while undertaking a remote, high-altitude, technical climb — ropes, ice axes, crampons, climbing helmets, etc. — on a

dangerous mountain. Imagine further that Jones' climbing partner has also been injured, although not as seriously as Jones. And let us assume that the prospects of anything other than self-rescue are virtually nil — that if Jones and his partner are to survive, they will have to take care of themselves. As the reader will perceive, Jones is in a life or death situation; and let us further make the (surely plausible) assumption that neither Jones nor his partner wish to die.

But let's add this to the scenario: Jones, being experienced as he is, also believes what is common knowledge among experienced climbers and mountain search and rescue personnel alike, namely, that one's prospects for survival may be greatly enhanced by having a positive attitude about one's capacity to affect events bearing on one's survival. In other words, Jones believes — truly, in fact — that believing that one can survive can enhance the likelihood of survival.⁴ Consider now several variations on P7:

P7a: I shall survive this dire mountain climbing emergency, *even though my evidence is that there is an extremely low likelihood that I can make it (can survive).*

P7b: I shall survive this dire mountain climbing emergency, *even though my evidence is that there is a slightly less than even chance that I will make it.*

P7c: I shall survive this dire mountain climbing emergency, *even though my evidence is that there is only a 50/50 chance that I can make it.*⁵

Let's consider whether Jones plausibly has any direct control over his belief in these propositions.

In the case of P7a, I think that Jones has a doxastic situation broadly analogous to what he would have were he asked to believe in the falsehood of P3: This is my hand in front of my face, as he stood there staring at his hand. Jones just can't believe that P3 is false, and he similarly just cannot believe that P7a is true, much as he might wish it were otherwise. Sometimes you are doomed, and that's that: say your prayers and prepare as best you can for the end. Of course, Jones may *act as though* he believed P7a was false — he may decide to “go down fighting” no matter what the odds — but there comes a point where one has no choice but to believe. In the case of P7a, then, Jones' lamentable predicament supports the Peels/Alston line on doxastic choice.

But consider now Jones' doxastic relationship to P7c. We may suppose that the situation has these salient features: (i) Jones firmly believes

that he faces a life or death situation; (ii) Jones believes that he possesses substantial abilities relevant to survival in situations of this sort (i.e., he is a highly skilled mountaineer facing a mountaineering emergency — not, say, a scuba diving emergency, where he may have few if any relevant skills), and that Jones' climbing partner, being injured as well, cannot effect a rescue; (iii) Jones is extremely motivated to do what he can to survive; (iv) Jones judges the evidence to be that he has an even chance of living or dying, and he takes this judgment seriously; and crucially, (v) Jones believes that *his believing in the truth of P7c will enhance the likelihood of his survival*, which is in effect to believe that his believing that P7c is true will make it more likely that P7c is (or will become) true. Now ask yourself, is it plausible to think that Jones could *choose* to believe P7c? I suggest that the answer is *yes*. And I suspect that those who simply dismisses this possibility out of hand have likely never faced a serious, imminent existential threat — not a threat where they perceive that their own agency is pivotal to the outcome. One's motivation to believe in a way that conduces to a positive outcome in such circumstances may be exceedingly strong, even if the evidence is only 50/50 in one's favor. But this looks a lot like *intentional doxastic choice*, does it not? Especially if, as per feature (iv), Jones takes his rational assessment of the situation seriously.

Similarly, in the case of P7b: I shall survive this dire mountain climbing emergency, *even though my evidence is that there is a slightly less than even chance that I will make it*, where Jones perceives the evidence to be marginally against his survival, it still seems plausible that Jones has choice over whether or not to believe. The same factors — rational, motivational, and agential — are in play.⁶ And we may add that Jones may well hold that his perceived evidence set {E} may be incomplete or that he is misconstruing it; and so why not give himself the “benefit of the doubt” — where the benefit is that he may live when he may otherwise die — and *choose* to believe that he can survive? Note the contrast between Jones' believing P7b and P7c: regarding the latter, Jones would presumably be inclined, absent the urgency of his situation, to simply suspend belief, i.e., Jones would neither believe nor disbelieve that P7c is true, while regarding P7b, he would be inclined to believe in its falsehood. So, we may say that *ceteris paribus*, believing P7b's truth would take a greater act of “doxastic will” than believing P7c.

“All too extreme — too exotic for me!” may be the retort to these examples. “Jones is in extremis, and understandably grasping at straws. Psychologically interesting though these cases may be, we can't draw any general doxastic morals from them.” I doubt that, but very well, let's

ramp down the exigency of the situation, and consider belief in these propositions:

P8: He's a very good pitcher — one of the best — but I can hit his fastball.

P9: You can do it Suzie — you can go out there and show those kids in your (4th grade) class that you're the best dancer!

No one is going to die here. No one's career or life prospects turns on success or failure. But why think the batter cannot believe that he can get a hit (can get on base), even though he knows that a baseball batter is doing extraordinarily well if he is batting .400 (i.e., gets a hit 40% of the time that he is at bat, and therefore that statistically speaking, he probably will fail to get a hit)? Surely, he may *believe* that he can. You doubt this? Well, ask successful batters — or successful baseball coaches. And why can't Suzie believe that she really can "show the kids in my class that I'm the best dancer," even though her sober cogitations (?) may suggest otherwise. People call this kind of thing "positive thinking." Neither aspiring athletes, nor dancers, nor *epistemologists* should be dismissive.

As is clear from what I have said earlier, I am certainly not denying that there are cases where belief is compelled. I will indeed grant that belief is usually and for the most part compelled. But as Judith Jarvis Thomson famously says, "there are cases and cases, and the details make a difference" [Thomson (1971), p. 58], and what I am suggesting is that there are cases where there is doxastic "wiggle room" — cases where there is some degree of doxastic optionality. Peels and co. seem to overlook this.

But lest I appear to go too far, I should concede that the range of doxastic choice for any given *S* is likely an empirical question — adopting as I do the Alstonian interpretation of the basic control thesis (viz., that doxastic choice is psychologically possible, not merely logically possible) — and I should also concede that there is surely substantial variability not only between epistemic agents, but even for any given epistemic agent over time, and relative to all kinds of factors — some exogenous, such as physical circumstance, clarity of evidence, and the temporal dimension of belief — and some endogenous, such as how highly motivated the agent is to believe one way or the other, and the agent's affective attitude toward the subject matter at hand. So, agent *S* may have more or less capacity for doxastic choice than agent *R*, and *R* may be able to choose in one circumstance but not in another, and so on

and so on. Sorting through these matters properly falls, I suspect, in part if not largely to experimental psychology. But it is enough for my purposes if we can agree that there is strong *prima facie* credibility to cases such as I have adduced. If so, that suggests that Peels' project needs emendation.

III. ON MODIFYING AND EXPANDING PEELS' PROJECT

But emend the project in what respect(s)? Well, the first thing that Peels should do is to abjure commitment to hard doxastic involuntarism; for if my arguments above convince, hard doxastic involuntarism is too, well...*hard*. In other words, the basic control thesis is not completely false, for there are cases where direct doxastic choice is psychologically possible.

This means, second, that Peels should retract his view that the only viable avenue to defend the possibility of doxastic responsibility is to argue that *S* may be responsible for the choices she makes that *influence* belief. That is to say, on Peels' view, because *S* cannot intentionally choose to believe that *p* at time *t₁* (remember, we are limiting discussion here to occurrent belief), if we are to hold *S* responsible for believing that *p*, the locus of responsibility emanates from *S*'s choice, or failure to choose, to do any of a range of things *XYZ* at some previous *t_{1-n}* that may influence her believing that *p*. We may say that, for Peels, doxastic responsibility is *indirect*.

To illustrate, let's go back to the mountains. But we now have a different mountain climber, Smith — a mountain guide, in fact — and Smith is looking up at a 45 degree, heavily loaded snow slope glistening in the mid-day sun. In order to complete the descent off the mountain, there is no choice but to cross this slope. One option is to chance it — to cross the snow slope — the other option is to wait for many hours until evening comes and the sun is down and the cold air stabilizes the snow, and to cross it then. But this delay will occasion other complications, some serious, which we need not concern ourselves with here. After considering the situation, Smith believes:

P10: It is safe to cross this snow slope.

Smith and his client set off across the snow slope, and...it avalanches, killing both.

The unfortunate Smith could scarcely have been more wrong, but on Peels' analysis, Smith is not directly responsible for believing P10, nor could he be, for no one is directly responsible, so to speak, for one's propositional belief. If Smith believes that the snow slope was safe to cross, then at what we might call the "primary doxastic" level, that's that, he believes it. It is rather like — indeed, bears substantial analogy to — if Smith sees everything with a bluish hue, or is repulsed by the thought of human feces, then he can't but see everything with a bluish hue and or be repulsed by the thought of human feces. In all of these cases, Smith is simply presented with an occurrent phenomenological state — sensuous, emotional, or *doxastic* — and over the brute fact of such phenomenal presentations, one has no direct choice.

But, Peels' analysis holds that Smith may not be off the hook, epistemically speaking, for Smith may be culpable for choices that influenced his (catastrophically) mistaken belief in the safety of the snow slope. Smith is a mountain guide, and it is the business of mountain guides to know how safely to navigate avalanche-prone terrain. And it is doubly the business of mountain guides not to get their clients killed. Smith failed on both counts. Perhaps Smith was remiss in his study of avalanche conditions. Perhaps Smith failed adequately to consider the information available to him — the effects of the mid-day sun on the snow, the angle of the snow-slope (45 degrees is optimal for avalanches), the absence of stabilizing factors such as trees or protruding rocks, etc. — or perhaps Smith should have dug an avalanche pit to study how well bonded the snow layers were, which could have provided clues to the instability of the slope. Well, Smith did none of this, which would suggest that he did not choose responsibly. But notice that in this case, as in all such cases, if Smith was doxastically (ir)responsible, *it was for the choices he made preceding his belief in P10*.

But suppose now that Smith had entertained not P10, but

P10a: My evidence is 50/50 that the snow slope will avalanche, but it is safe to cross;

and that Smith *chose* to believe this proposition. Perhaps Smith, in addition to whatever strictly prudential considerations may have been in play, e.g., the hazards attendant to waiting until evening, may have been especially motivated to get down off the mountain to attend a party that night. I think we would be strongly inclined to say that this is a case of "wishful thinking" on Smith's part, and that he was *irresponsible for his*

choice to believe that the snow slope was safe. Note the salient difference between this case and that of his fellow mountain climber Jones, who we imagine chose to believe

P7c: I (Jones) can survive this dire mountain climbing emergency, even though my evidence is that there is only a 50/50 chance that I can make it.

We have seen that Jones' "positive thinking" may well increase the likelihood of P7c's being (or becoming) true; but it would require powers utterly unfathomable to me for Smith's "wishful thinking" to affect that snow slope, hence the likelihood of P10a's truth. Jones' choice to believe is *prima facie* responsible, while Smith's is not.

Now one might say that it is by definition irresponsible to believe that *p* when the evidence is 50/50 — that suspension of belief is the only proper course. This is W. K. Clifford's perspective, according to whom "it is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" [Clifford (1877), p. 129]. Well, is it? Perhaps not, if the case of Jones' survival is convincing.⁷ But, one may respond:

You're mixing apples and oranges here. The sort of "responsibility" at issue is whether Jones is justified in believing that P7c is true on *epistemic* grounds — and Jones is not. Perhaps Jones is justified in believing P7c on *prudential* grounds: we can accept that it is prudent for Jones to believe what will conduce to his survival, but prudential grounds and epistemic grounds are not the same thing. For all we know, it may be prudent — survival enhancing — for Jones to believe that his fairy godmother will save him, but he hasn't a shred of evidence to support it. He is clearly not being epistemically responsible in believing the latter, nor is he, by parity of reasoning, in believing the former.

To which I say, point taken — as far as it goes.⁸ But it is often unclear what properly constitutes one's evidence set {E} relative to believing that *p*. So, consider what belongs in {E} for Jones relative to believing P7c. Certainly the facts of the situation — his injuries, the chances of external rescue, his and his partner's abilities, etc. — but also, I suggest, *the evidence he has in favor of the effects on the situation of positive belief*. If one includes this in {E}, Jones looks a lot less irresponsible. Indeed, he looks a lot *more* responsible than if he had failed to include this evidence.

There is a Jamesian element in my suggestion here — a cautious endorsement of a “will to believe” in the face of evidence that does not militate disbelief [see James (1986)]. For James not only implicitly endorses doxastic voluntarism—how robust is a matter I won’t pause to consider — and he drives home the point that if we take our epistemic charge to be both maximizing truth and minimizing falsehood, we face incompatible goals. Maximizing truth entails taking certain epistemic risks; minimizing falsehood counsels extreme risk averseness. I take it that Peels’ analysis implicitly emphasizes the latter, while I am here highlighting the former. Adjudicating which should be emphasized when and where is a complex business I can’t get into here; but I am in effect suggesting that Jones is justified in taking some non-minimal degree of doxastic risk in this situation — in particular, in choosing to believe that he can survive, despite the inconclusiveness of his evidence. And I further suggest that Peels expand his project to include principles of doxastic responsibility bearing on maximizing truth. That would entail developing principles of responsibility not only where S chooses to believe that p on evidence that confers a probability of truth $\leq .5$, but where S acts, or fails to act, in ways that would influence his belief that p when the evidence is $\leq .5$.

Now I want to emphasize that Peels quite rightly, I think, holds that doxastic responsibility is incompatible with hard doxastic involuntarism [see Peels (2017), ch. 2 *passim*]. That is to say, in order for S ’s belief that p to be in principle evaluably responsible — i.e., “responsible” in a way that would potentially bear epistemic censure — there must be something that S *could have chosen to do otherwise* that would have affected her belief. But given that he thinks that S cannot chose to believe that p , Peels holds that if doxastic responsibility is not to be otiose, S ’s sphere of doxastic choice must lie “outside” of directly believing that p — that is, outside of believing that p at what we might call the “primary level.” It must lie, rather, within the sphere of choice to do, or to refrain from doing, things that will *influence* the likelihood of believing that p . Call this choice at the “secondary doxastic level.” I, however, disagree; for I hold that responsibility may *also* extend to the primary doxastic level: there are cases — perhaps unusual, perhaps not — where direct choice of belief is (psychologically) possible. The examples I have sketched above are designed to bring this out.

The reader may of course disagree with the details of what I have just said; but the point to be taken is that this dispute can’t even get off the ground on Peels’ analysis, for he denies the premise on which the

debate turns, namely, that one could, for example, *chose to believe* that the snow slope is safe to cross.

Let's illustrate how an expanded Peelsian analysis might deal with doxastic responsibility, primary and secondary. To do so, let's get out of the mountains, and into medicine:

Case 1: Greene is the parent of a small child suffering from a serious bacterial infection. The child is hospitalized, diagnosed, treated, and in due course released from the hospital into Greene's care. The doctor has provided Greene with detailed written instructions on the child's care, including signs to look for that would indicate that the patient is deteriorating, and also the doctor's emergency contact information, all of which Greene ignores. Imagine now that at some later time Greene sees that the child is behaving oddly, but believes that p , 'My child is in no poorer health now than when I brought him home from the hospital'. Unfortunately, however, p is false, and the child dies. *Question:* Did Greene believe that p responsibly?

Case 2: White's child is beset by severe stomach cramps and nausea. White believes that the child almost surely ingested a poison, and determines that the quickest way to get the child to emergency medical care is to drive her to the hospital six miles away. White also believes, quite correctly, that the best treatment, prior to securing professional medical care for the sort of poisoning White has in mind, is to administer a modest amount of antidote A commonly available in households. White then believes that q : 'The proper thing to do, under these circumstances, is to have the child ingest a moderate amount of antidote A', and acts on this belief — whereupon the child goes into convulsions and dies. An autopsy indicates that the child did indeed die of poisoning, but not from the source that had White suspected, but rather from a very rare substance — a substance which no one can figure out how the child came into contact with — and that the very worst thing one can do in such cases is to ingest antidote A. *Question:* Did White believe that q responsibly?

Case 3: While at home, Black's child, who is only 18 months old, suddenly begins to choke. Black believes that the child has swallowed something that stuck in his throat, obstructing but not fully occluding his breathing passage. Black understands that this is an emergency, is familiar with the Heimlich Maneuver to dislodge such obstructions, but only has acquaintance with how to perform the procedure on adults. Black is con-

cerned that she may seriously injure or even kill such a small child if she performs the maneuver, and believes that that the evidence is 50/50 that she can benefit the child by doing so. Black is understandably beside herself with fear for the child's survival, and to give herself resolve, *chooses to believe* that r , 'I can successfully perform the Heimlich Maneuver on this child'. Black performs the procedure and is successful. *Question*: Did Black believe r responsibly?

Peels' theory enables us to address Case 1 & Case 2, but not Case 3. And to Peels' credit, I think his theory gets Cases 1 & 2 right: Greene is doxastically irresponsible, for Greene failed to choose to do what would have put him in a proper position to believe $\sim p$, i.e., 'It is *not the case* that my child is in no poorer health now than when I brought him home from the hospital'. Greene failed to choose to read over the doctor's instructions, etc., and owing to this failure is epistemically (doxastically) irresponsible. On the other hand, on Peels' analysis White was not doxastically irresponsible, for it is unreasonable to expect White, not an expert on human poisons, to have been familiar with the exceedingly rare form of poison that his child ingested — a form of poison only identified by medical experts post mortem [see Peels (2017), §3.6 and §3.7 for relevant discussion].

However, Peels' analysis *per se* cannot reach Case 3, in that he denies that Black could choose to believe that r — for Peels, one can only influence belief *indirectly* — whereas on the extension of Peels' analysis that I propose, it is plausible to think that Black could so choose, and therefore becomes a candidate for epistemic assessment at the primary doxastic level. *Was* Black irresponsible? Not easy to say, perhaps, especially without specifying what does and does not belong in Black's evidence-set $\{E\}$ — and that is hardly an uncontroversial issue. Surely the *result* of Black's choice is desirable, but many desirable results issue out of epistemically irresponsible choices. Perhaps the case as developed here lacks sufficient detail to make a confident determination. But my purpose here is not to perform such an analysis, but to press that Peels' project would be strengthened were it modified and expanded to *accommodate* such analysis.

IV. ON PRINCIPLES OF BELIEF FORMATION

In closing, I would like to sketch a few far from exhaustive principles regarding how we might think about responsibility and intentional doxastic choice.

- A. As argued the §II, there is a range (perhaps a continuum) of voluntaristic belief formation: at one pole, *S* has no intentional control over belief at the primary level — the “basic control thesis” is simply false when applied to such beliefs — while at the other pole, *S* possesses some intentional control over belief at the primary level. (It is quite implausible to hold that one can simply believe at will.)
- B. On the psychological interpretation of the basic control thesis adopted here (in common with Alston), I take A. to be an empirical matter. That is to say, I do not see that *S*'s possessing or failing to possess primary doxastic control over any given (occurrent) belief \emptyset , can be decided *a priori*.
- C. Given that *S* has intentional choice over any given member of her primary belief set {*B*}, the degree of choice will depend on a variety of factors, for example, *S*'s general psychological make up, *S*'s propensities at the time of (occurrent) believing, on the valuations *S* places on matters attendant to believing, etc.
- D. Responsible believing—at the primary or secondary level — is radically subjective in the sense that assessment must be based on whether one has, as Peels says, “acted in accordance with one’s *beliefs* about one’s intellectual obligations” [Peels (2017), p. 198, my emphasis], but is *not* radically subjective in the sense that objective principles cannot be formulated as to what these obligations are — which would be to deny the plausibility of a robust conception of epistemic responsibility, and with it, the plausibility of a cognitivist normative ethics.

I hope that Professor Peels will find my brief remarks of some help in further stimulating development of his excellent inquiry into the nature of responsible belief. I look forward to his response.⁹

Department of Philosophy
Santa Clara University
500 El Camino Real
Santa Clara CA 95053 USA
E-mail: ckulp@scu.edu

NOTES

¹ For an excellent discussion of objectual belief, see Robert Audi (2011), ch. 1. I deal with this issue, albeit briefly, in Kulp (2017), §1.1 and §4.1.

² See Peels (2017), §2.2, for discussion of Alston.

³ I think that 743 is probably not prime, but still I truthfully report that my occurrent belief is neither that it is prime nor that it is not prime. Whether or not this reflects poorly upon me is for others to say.

⁴ The psychology behind this, important though it is, is not our concern here. I also note that belief alone is almost surely not sufficient. One could easily believe that one could get out of the way of an avalanche, yet despite the ease with which one could do so, fail to act on the belief — and die.

⁵ In the spirit of the example, I have cast these propositions in (very) ordinary language. If greater precision is demanded, as I believe unnecessary, then assign perceived evidential probabilities as follows: P7a, .02; P7b, .48; P7c, .5. The word ‘shall’ is intended to connote Jones’ *resolve* to survive

⁶ *S* believes that were he to believe P7b’s truth, the likelihood of its being true would be enhanced.

⁷ Actually, there are many reasons to resist this hard statement, among others its utter impracticality as applied to action. Just how “sufficient” must my evidence be to warrant my believing that it is appropriate, or feasible, to straighten my tie?

⁸ My colleague Eric Yang brought this issue to my attention.

⁹ My thanks to Matthew Frise and Eric Yang for helpful comments on this paper.

REFERENCES

- ALSTON, W. P. (1989), “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification,” reprinted in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, pp. 115-152.
- AUDI, R. (2011), *Epistemology*, 3rd edition, New York and London, Routledge.
- AUSTIN, J. L. (1979), “A Plea for Excuses,” in James O. Urmson and Geoffrey J. Warnock, eds., *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 175-204.
- BJÖRNSSON, G. (2017), “Review of Rik Peels, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*,” in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 17. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/responsible-belief-a-theory-in-ethics-and-epistemology/>
- CLIFFORD, W. K. (1877), “The Ethics of Belief,” reprinted in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, 15th edition, eds. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shaffer-Landau, Boston: Wadsworth, 2013, pp. 125-129.
- JAMES, W. (1896), “The Will to Believe,” delivered to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities; reprinted in *Essays in Pragmatism*, edited by Albury Castell, New York, Hafner Publishing Co., 1948, pp. 88-109.

- KULP, C. (2017), *Knowing Moral Truth: A Theory of Metaethics and Moral Knowledge*, Lanham, MD; Lexington/Rowman & Littlefield.
- PEELS, R. (2017), *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- THOMSON, J. J. (1971), "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, no. 1, fall, pp. 47-66.